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ABSTRACT

This study examined the degree to which readers' affective responses to levels of language usage reflect their attitudes toward language usage. The subjects, 51 college juniors and seniors, read nine simulated newspaper interviews and completed five semantic differential scales that indicated their impressions of the interviewee's personality and educational background, based on the language style (formal-standard, colloquial, substandard) of direct quotations from the interviewee's remarks. After subjects completed an English language attitude inventory that established either conservative or liberal language attitudes, differences in the semantic differential scales were analyzed. Results indicate that the "intelligent-unintelligent" and "cultured-uncultured" scales provided significantly greater distinctions between language style, and that the "language liberals" had the larger mean-differences on these scales. The study concludes that language liberals are more sensitive to language differences, probably because of their own educational background and language training. (RL)

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MATURE READERS' LEVELS OF LANGUAGE-CONSERVATISM AS RELATED TO THEIR AFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO THREE LEVELS OF LANGUAGE-USAGE

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In his preface to Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw noted that " ... it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him." What Shaw was referring to, of course, is the way in which a person's dialect or level of language usage provides cues to his or her social position. In fact, so well-accepted are the links between dialect and/or level of language usage and the impressions formed about a speaker's social and economic status that authors and playwrights have long been exploiting this phenomenon to build characterization.

Previous research (Dulin and Greenewald, 1976; Dymond, 1977)

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has shown that mature readers do respond affectively to this device of characterization, but why some readers appear to be more sensitive to language differences than are others still remains to be investigated. The present study explores this question by examining the relationships between readers' affective responses to levels of language-usage and their attitudes towards language-usage per se. It was hypothesized that language "conservatives" (those who hold very definite ideas about what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" usage) would show greater sensitivity to differences between and among formal, colloquial, and substandard levels of language used as devices of characterization than would language "liberals" (those who are more accepting of variance in language).

Method

Fifty-one mature readers (juniors and seniors in a course on Secondary Reading) were asked to read nine simulated newspaper interviews and indicate their mental impressions of each interviewees' personality and educational background on five-step semantic differential scales presenting the following five pairs of polar adjectives: WARM-COLD, FRIENDLY-UNFRIENDLY, LIKABLE-UNLIKABLE, INTELLIGENT-UNINTELLIGENT, and CULTURED-UNCULTURED.

Each of the nine simulated newspaper interviews was presented in one of three versions, with each version differing in the level of language used in the direct quotations of the interviewees' remarks, either (a) formal standard, that variety of English used by educated people when writing or speaking carefully, (b) colloquial, those varieties of language used by educated people in conversation and conversational writing, or

(c) sub-standard, that level of oral language typically used by the uneducated. For example, "would have" in the formal version became "would've" in the colloquial version and "would of" in the sub-standard version.

Next, an English Language Attitude Inventory was administered to the subjects. This inventory was created out of ten pairs of statements expressing either conservative or liberal attitudes about language to which the subjects were asked to indicate their levels of agreement or disagreement. The conservative items were scored from a 5 of "strong agreement" to a 1 of "strong disagreement" and the liberal statements were scored in reverse order. When these scores were summed, then, the resulting totals were assumed to represent the subjects' levels of conservatism towards language-usage.

A second measure of language attitude consisting of five self-rating scales was administered along with the attitude inventory. Here, subjects were asked to judge their own language training, their own use and attitudes toward language, and their friends' use and attitudes toward language on a scale of five running from "a good deal more conservative than most" to "a good deal more liberal than most." Finally, the subjects were given the Nelson Denny Reading Test and the Mikulecky Behavioral Reading Attitude Measure or MBRAM scale (Mikulecky, 1976).

Results

An analysis of variance of reader-response to the three levels of language used in the interviews yielded significant F-ratios ($p > .01$) on the "Intelligence" and "Culture" scales for each of the nine articles. No significant differences were observed on the personality-related scales.

When version-against-version comparisons were made on the "Intelligence" and "Culture" scales for each article, significant differences were found in every Formal over Substandard and Colloquial over Substandard comparison, but in only one case in terms of a Formal over Colloquial comparison. This response-pattern is similar to the one found in the Dymond study (1977) on affective response to different levels of language usage.

To validate the language attitude inventory, the subjects' language conservatism scores were correlated with their self-ratings of language attitude and their reading achievement and reading attitude scores. A significant correlation of .536 ($p < .001$) was found between the language attitude inventory scores and all five self-rating scales. Attitude toward reading, reading comprehension, reading rate, and total vocabulary-comprehension scores on the Nelson-Denny were not found to correlate significantly with language conservatism. A significant negative relationship of -.330 ($p < .013$) was observed, however, between language conservatism and vocabulary subtest scores on the Nelson-Denny.

To further validate the language attitude inventory, t-test comparisons were made between the scores of the "liberal" (below the median) and "conservative" (above the median) language attitude subjects on the self-rating scales, the MBRAM scale, and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. Liberals and conservatives were found to differ significantly on all the self-rating scales. On the reading-related tests, significant differences were found on the vocabulary subtest on the Nelson-Denny only, with the liberals superior.

To find out whether the language conservatives were more sensitive than the liberals to the three levels of language used in the simulated newspaper interviews, the liberal and conservative subjects' mean differences in affective response to the formal-over-colloquial, formal-over-substandard, and colloquial-over-substandard versions were computed for each response scale and were then subjected to t-test comparisons. Significantly different mean-differences in affective response were observed between formal and colloquial versions on the "Intelligence" and "Culture" scales and on the three personality-related scales combined, and between formal and substandard versions on the "Culture" scale. In all five cases, however, it was the liberals who had the larger mean-differences, rather than the conservatives as had originally been hypothesized.

Discussion

Whether the language liberals like it or not then, it seems to be they, rather than the language conservatives, who are the more sensitive to differences in language usage. While the liberals may be more open and accepting of variance in language, as their language attitude inventory and self-rating scores would suggest, it seems that they are, at the same time, more <u>aware</u> of language differences, and, in their reading, at least, more inclined to take them into account.

One explanation for the liberals' greater responsiveness to language differences may lie in their language training. Their liberal language educations while stressing that language varieties are equally complex linguistic systems and

not deviations from a norm may have had the effect of heightening rather than decreasing their awareness of language differences.

Differences in the affective-response of language liberals and language conservatives also appear to be related to reading ability and reading attitude. The liberals performed significantly better on the Nelson-Denny vocabulary subtest and, though not significantly so, were also superior to the conservatives on the reading comprehension, reading rate, and reading attitude measures.

These findings are reminiscent of those found by the same researchers on a whole series of studies on affective-response to propaganda devices (Dulin and Greenewald, 1975). There, too, the better readers were also the more sensitive readers.

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